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"Does Beethoven Have to Roll Over? Not If We Flip Him!" paper for session: "Who's Afraid of High Culture?"

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*Does Beethoven Have to Roll Over?
Not If We Flip Him!*

Presentation for Roundtable Discussion:

“Who’s Afraid of High Culture?”

German Studies Association Conference
September 19, 2014
Kansas City, MO

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Loyola University Chicago

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Opening

History 102—“Western Civ” as I teach it-- is a survey of the Humanities from Ancient Mesopotamian Culture to Post-War European Existentialism. It is designed to teach not just about arts, but about times and context around them.

Last year, I “flipped” this course: recording my lectures, adding visual and musical examples, and creating videos that students watch “on their own time.” In addition to writing two papers, they are required to respond to each lecture video in open “forums.” I then study these entries and use class time to answer questions or address issues raised by the students themselves.

All of these forum entries give me sense of what they know and they don’t know about Western Civ and Humanities—or high culture, which is my focus. I was initially angry and frustrated when I went through the “first forum reader shock” of receiving many entries that seemed to indicate that students were indeed “afraid of high culture,” or worse: completely unaware of it.

Over the last year, however, I have come to realize that what I have in this “raw material” is an amazing map of what young people do or do not know--where their educations had failed them—or my lectures had. Now I use my heightened perception of those gaps as opportunities to go into the classroom to “close” them—by inspiring more interest through greater emphasis, or by adding more exciting examples, etc.

Background: Music Structure and Enlightenment

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General

I really enjoyed this lecture on neoclassicism and musical *form*. I found it really interesting how music without words can convey such meaning. Each of the different musical forms has a theme that it carries on throughout the rest of the piece. The theme itself is like the narrative.

I would have never thought to connect a piece of music to a specific theme representative of an era, but after this lecture it is becoming much more clear how they can relate. The organization of music shows the different type of patterns or sequences that it would follow. Whether it was a fugue, minuet, rondo, or sonata, you could follow the general form. This relates back to the desire for structure, order, and balance. Even with the dances that accompanied the music, you always had a sense of what was to come, displaying the stability of the music.

I've never really noticed the little details in classical music that were mentioned in this lecture. I've seen many plays with classical music, and just naturally I know that the music is what adds to the play however I never really tried to figure out how. The fact that this music is organized a certain way so that the story flows, and the different pitches of the music representing different themes is [*really*] interesting.

While listening to some of the music samples and using what I had learned from the lecture, I was absolutely amazed. I was able to pick up the differences in the emotion and themes in each song. This is something that I would not have really picked up on my own and so it was definitely an

Beethoven

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Mozart to Beethoven

When comparing Mozart's and Beethoven's music, I couldn't believe the differences. When listening to classical music, I used to always think it was all the same. People would be like "This has to be Mozart" or "This has to be Beethoven" and I would look at them as if they were crazy for being able to tell. Although after this lecture, I can now see the differences.

Mozart is connected with the Rococo and he created music that reflected the Rococo, and then Beethoven lived during a violent era and his music, such as the brash beginning of Symphony No. 3. I just find it fascinating that their music reflected their lives and the environments that they lived in. Honestly I feel like Mozart's music could reflect the high and fun moments of one's life, and Beethoven's music could reflect the deep and emotional moments of one's life.

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General

I was very captivated in learning about Beethoven. His life, in my mind, is like a soap opera. This gives me more of a reason for the appreciation of his music, and an understanding to the background of where it is coming from

I was completely enthralled with Beethoven's story. . . . In all honesty though, there are probably only a few of us who haven't had our fair share of insane occurrences in life. I don't think that he could have done a better job, especially in his later pieces, communicating not only the unsure nature of his own life, but the unsureness of every person's life. Beethoven composed timeless works of art and now I understand that it is more than because he composed some "classics" and more because he took what it means to be human and turned it into a musical masterpiece. Beethoven's pieces are timeless because he took the one of the only sure things in this world, unsureness, and through it communicated emotions we can all relate to through the highs and lows of our individual lives.

I enjoyed listening to Beethoven's music even more after I learned more about his life. To me, it is almost a rags to riches story: a boy with a difficult and abusive childhood who grows up to be one of the greatest composers. Obviously that is putting it in very simple terms, but I (like most people) enjoy a good Cinderella story. Also, I truly believe that his genius had to come from all the pain and difficulties he experienced and endured throughout his life, almost as if he channeled that into his creative genius.

Overcoming challenges

It is quite terrible, yet fascinating to hear about Beethoven's life. To see a boy who is basically abused from childhood in order to become a prodigy comparable to Mozart is very sad. Though of course this is not the way to do things, it is interesting to see that it actually helped Beethoven become the innovative musical genius that he was. But then has to travel back and forth to see his sick mother. Later on in his life, Beethoven starts to lose his hearing, has his heart broken, and is suicidal. Though these are qualities which can crush a person, maybe it made Beethoven the person that he was?

One would think that a musical genius like Beethoven lived a perfect life of praise and happiness when in fact it was really the opposite. I did not know about the suicidal letter he left, or the other one talking about his "immortal beloved." Once one hears more about his life story, he or she is able to interpret his music into words. I find it amazing how music can convey feelings and emotions that words are unable to. For example, in the lecture Professor Dennis discussed when one of his good friends was going through some tough times, he went over to solace her and said "and now we will speak in music." He played for her hours and music did just as good, or perhaps even better, of a job in helping console the woman after her child's death. This truly shows the magic in Beethoven's music.

When listening to the first sonata that was discussed in this lecture, you can hear how his music contrasts to other musicians that we have previously studied. As Dr. Dennis was discussing

Beethoven and Romanticism

Just as Beethoven's music reflected the chaotic environment around Europe and challenged the styles of the previous era, so did the culture as a whole become more true to its surroundings.

Mozart fits into the world of the aristocracy and not the world of the Revolution - since he didn't live long enough to really respond to the Revolution. It is speculated that his Freemason alignment would have led him to join the Revolution, however. Beethoven's political leanings were not in question like Mozart's, and the way he used his music to promote his political views is absolutely fascinating.

The shift in Beethoven's music from the dance music of the Rococo to the powerful, emotional music of the Romantic period shows clearly how he straddled the time periods. His innovative work in fact helped push the musical climate of the time into the Romantic period.

In the poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley there is a line that goes as such, "our sweetest songs are those that tell of saddest thought." From this line I was intensely reminded of the music of Beethoven. Did Beethoven ever read poetry from other Romantics? In the salons did artists bounce ideas off of each other? Was there ever any artistic collaboration like in today's world?

The ideology behind Romanticism, or what I understood it to be, was that there is no rigid structure to life, which I agree with. . . . Life was hard during this time for many people and the art beautifully depicts the suffering and strife that

Beethoven and Bonaparte

His music embraced the chaos and disorder that came about during the French Revolution. . . . His music did not have that comfort of repetition but rather a constant feeling of unknown and sharpness that described the reality of that time.

It was mentioned that he was coming of age during the Revolution and I think that this all makes so much sense and helps me understand the use of his talent so much more. If it were not for the Enlightenment, the Revolution would not have occurred and that applies to Beethoven's music as well. Living during the Revolution and after these cultural eras provides him with the opportunity to branch out and compose music that shows the evolution of culture. I think that his life can also be related to the life of Napoleon, but only because he was growing up in conditions that were not the best, yet he was able to turn that around and still be very successful.

On another note, I am pleased that Beethoven was so mad at and about Napoleon Bonaparte crowning himself as emperor. . . . I really enjoyed this dialogue in the movie clip, *Eroica*, after the first attempt at playing the Symphony written regarding Bonaparte: "Violent. Needlessly Violent." "Bonaparte." I thought that communicated Beethoven's and others' feelings on Napoleon just as the symphony was made to do.

I'm not sure if this is the specific song that was being referenced to in class, but I found a link to Beethoven's *Eroica* from a show called *Keeping Score*. <http://www.pbs.org/keepingscore/beethoven-eroica.html> [In it] you can see the

Beethoven and Nature

Beethoven preserves the benefits of keeping in tune with nature to bring about emotions and relieve isolation. It is fascinating how by submerging himself into an isolated environment, nature, he found comfort in the company of the greenery that surrounded him.

While I was listening to Beethoven's symphony number 6, movement 3, it was easy to hear the delight of being away from the city. As the lecture talked about, nature was a huge part of Romanticism because people were able to escape from the real world and their busy lives. Unlike some of the other symphonies, number six is more upbeat and has a happier theme throughout the piece. When looking up more about this piece, I read that it was composed during the summer months, just like Dr. Dennis had mentioned during the lecture. Symphony number six is said to come from Beethoven's love of nature. It's interesting to see how much nature really did seem to affect the way he looked at life..

After going home for fall break, I *was [aware of]* being surrounded by nature. Because my house is directly on Lake Michigan, I am surrounded by beauty all the time. This allows me to appreciate what Beethoven was suggesting about nature.

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Appassionata Sonata

I really enjoyed listening to his "Passionate Sonata" and how people were making such an effort to find happiness and especially balance, but it was constantly being thrown off kilter by this loud hammering noise of fate. I also like how it encourages the listener to find their salvation in nature. It is suggesting that although we can't completely escape reality, we can find some refuge within it, and that is in nature. One can temporarily forget one's self when they are immersed in nature and it is through nature that we don't feel so alone and alienated.

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Moonlight Sonata

As I listen to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, I start to feel entranced into the music as if I were in the room listening to him play it for me. It is an immensely emotional song to listen to with your eyes closed because I imagine this dark, candle-lit room with Beethoven playing his heart out. His hardships and life experience was most likely the inspiration that inhibited him to make such a beautiful structured piece.

The Moonlight Sonata is by far one of my favorite piano pieces and just listening to it on my computer gives me goosebumps. I cannot imagine how it must have felt to hear him play it in person, as many people were blessed to have been able to. When listening to any of his piano music, one can hear the story or imagine the story he is trying to depict. And if one does not know the story behind the music, they imagine their own. And then when in the lecture Professor Dennis noted the "dialogue" between the instruments, I was definitely assured that hearing his music in person would have been enchanting. Whenever I listen to the Moonlight sonata, I can picture some type of quarrel between a couple slowly escalating to a large fight and then coming back to a resolution ... Or maybe this is just me and my strange imagination.

When I listened to the Beethoven clips one stuck out to me and that was Moonlight Sonata, mostly because that was the first Beethoven song I knew, and I learned it from Hamataro Heartbreak. [*A Japanese cartoon, with characters something like "Hello Kitty."*] Seriously here's the *clip*.

Contemporary/Personal Connections with Beethoven

I was in Vienna not too long ago and I will be going back in a month. I believe that I saw Beethoven's home when I was there, but I believe that I will definitely make a tribute (pilgrimage) to his home or anything relating to Beethoven.

I think it would be so interesting to go back in time to really realize the changes he was making and the reactions that were stirring among the people..

This lecture on Beethoven brought me back to my first piano competition piece, where I performed Fur Elise for the first time. I remember my teacher reminding me to express emotion while playing, but that came easily to me because of how the piece was composed.

[Beethoven] actually reminds me of many artists of our time. The most ridiculous comparison, Britney Spears, because her drunk and sad parents also used her as a paycheck to get somewhere in life. I liked the comparison to an early Elvis that Dr. Dennis talked about, but really he was a talented and tortured soul.

I've noticed that some newer artists (mainly electronic/deep house) often mix music using Beethoven- I wonder if anybody knows who should really be given the credit!

I always *thought* of him¹⁴ as an elderly man who had created all these beautiful songs over many, many years. To think about what he had accomplished at my age is hard to even rap my mind round. There emotion that is portrayed at every